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Marie B. Gillespie

Media, Minority Youth and the Public Sphere

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel beschreibt ethnographisch, wie jugendliche Angehörige von Migranten aus dem Pandschab (Indien) in London Fernsehnachrichtensendungen nutzen, um einen Zugang zu der Welt der Erwachsenen zu erreichen und zu deren politischem Diskurs. Das HABERMASsche Konzept der Öffentlichkeit wird in diesem Beitrag als kritisches Instrument sowohl der Kulturanalyse als auch der demokratischen Kommunikation verwendet. Weil das Curriculum der britischen Schulen keinerlei formale politische Bildung vorsieht, wird besonders der Frage nachgegangen, wie junge Menschen den Übergang aus der Abhängigkeit innerhalb der Familie zu aktiven Bürgern in der politischen Arena und in der Öffentlichkeit bewältigen. Für eine jugendliche Minderheit haben besonders die Fragen der Nationalität, der Ethnie und des aktiven Staatsbürgertums eine größere Bedeutung, insbesondere dann, wenn ihnen die Teilnahme am politischen Prozeß und der Öffentlichkeit erschwert und damit auch die volle Einbürgerung verweigert wird. Wenngleich britische Schulen formal wenig tun, um Schüler in die öffentlichen Belange einzuführen, kann gezeigt werden, daß besonders Schüler, die schon mit einer entsprechenden kulturellen Bildung ausgestattet sind, die Angebote nutzen, die ihnen die Nachrichtenmedien zugänglich machen; was nicht heißen sollte, daß Schulen die politische Bildung vernachlässigen dürfen. Dieser Beitrag beurteilt die Relevanz von HABERMAS' Konzept der Öffentlichkeit für die Arten alltäglicher Kommunikation, die junge Asiaten benutzen, wenn sie sich informelll über die Nachrichten unterhalten. Dabei wird davon ausgegangen, daß es für Erziehende ratsam ist, um die jungen Menschen in ihrer Eigentätigkeit zu unterstützen, Einblicke in die informellen, kollaborativen und pädagogischen Strategien zu erlangen, die die Jugend anwendet, um zu einem Verständnis zu gelangen, wie sie in der bzw. für die Welt tätig sein könnte. Der Artikel will folgenden Fragen anregen: In welchem Ausmaß können die Diskussionen, die von jungen Leuten geführt werden, über Auswirkungen von Nachrichten, Politik und öffentlicher Belange als Anregungen für die Öffentlichkeit angesehen werden, oder sogar schon als Keimzelle einer Mini-Öffentlichkeit, die sich am Rand etabliert hat? Was kann die Vorstellung von einer transnationalen Öffentlichkeit potentiell bedeuten für eine sich in der Minderheit befindliche ethnische Jugend, deren Sinn für nationale Zugehörigkeit und Identität in ihrer Wahlheimat bedroht wird durch Rassismus und Diskriminierung, und deren Identifizierungsmöglichkeiten die nationalen kulturellen Grenzen zu überschreiten in der Lage wäre? Welche Aufgabe obliegt Erziehenden, Jugendlichen dabei zu helfen, in einer multikulturellen und zunehmend transnationalen Gesellschaft an einer vielfältigen demokratischer Kommunikation teilzunehmen?

Summary

This article examines the ways in which young people use the resources which news media provide as a means of gaining access to the world of adult and political discourse, and to the public sphere. The concept of the public sphere is used here both as a critical tool of cultural analysis, and as a measure of democratic communications. Given the lamentable lack of any formal political education in the national curriculum of British schools, the question of how young people make the transition

from dependent children in the family to active citizens in the political arena, and in the public sphere, is posed rather sharply. For minority youth, in particular, questions of nationality, ethnicity and active citizenship assume even greater importance especially when limited access to the resources required for active participation in the political process and public sphere effectively denies them full citizenship. However, although British schools are doing little, in a formal sense, to help to induct students into the public sphere, it will be argued that some minority ethnic youth, especially those with the necessary cultural and educational capital, are doing it for themselves through their appropriation of the resources that news media provide them. This is not to say that schools should neglect political education. This article assesses the relevance of Habermas' notion of the public sphere for the kinds of everyday communicative activities that young British Asians engage in as part of their informal talk about news media. In doing so it is hoped that as educators we might be in a better position to assist young people in their self-empowerment by gaining insight into the informal, collaborative, pedagogic strategies devised by youth themselves, outside the confines of the classroom and beyond the constraints of teacher-led curricular, in order to understand and act in/upon the world. The article will address the following questions: to what extent can the everyday debates that young people conduct about news events, political affairs, and public issues be considered to constitute an initiation into the public sphere, or even an embryonic mini-public sphere nesting on the margins? What is the potential significance of the notion of a transnational public sphere for minority ethnic youth whose sense of national belonging and identity in their country of settlement may be threatened by racism and discrimination, and whose strongest identifications may transcend national cultural boundaries? What role can and should educators play in assisting their pupils to participate in a plural public sphere of democratic communication in a multicultural and increasingly transnational society?

1 Introduction

The article draws upon a slice of ethnographic data from a more extensive research project into the uses of television in the negotiation of identity among London Punjabi youth and their families (for full details see GILLESPIE 1995). The study was based in Southall, west London, just several miles from Heathrow airport, with a population of some 65,000 (Census, 1991). Since the late 19th century, successive generations of migrant labourers have come to work in Southall's local industries from the North of England, Wales, and Ireland, and in the post World War Two period from the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent. It now houses one of the largest populations of South Asians outside the Indian sub-continent and is known locally as ‚Little India'. I worked in Southall as a secondary school teacher and as an ethnographic researcher for ten years. The study was based upon a survey of 330 young people (14-18) and extensive fieldwork in schools, families and various leisure sites over a three year period from 1988-92 (for full details of methodology see GILLESPIE 1995, chapter 2). In brief, it highlights how young British Asians appropriate the cultural resources that transnational (British, Indian, American and Australian) television and film provide to construct their social and cultural identities, to recreate South Asian cultural traditions, as well as to articulate aspirations towards cultural change.

As a former secondary school teacher it was curiosity about my pupil's everyday conversations, and often fierce debates, about television, in the informal contexts of the peer culture, which precipitated my research in the first place. Most research into youth and television concentrates on the putative harmful effects of TV upon its vulnerable and passive ‚victims' rather than on the way it may be used as a cultural and communicative

resource. My data suggest that young people are active and creative consumers of popular media. In their daily ‚TV talk', they analyse television narratives and use them to compare and contrast their own social worlds with the social worlds they experience vicariously through television. For young people living in a ‚racially' segregated suburb of London, their main access to British society is through television. This is crucial to an understanding of the significant role of television narratives in their lives, and in everyday collective negotiations of their shifting positions in multiple worlds, and across various axes: local and global, national and international, diasporic and transnational. Their encounters and contact with ‚gori' (white people) are for the most part limited to relationships with school teachers, and with the very small minority of white working class youth who attend their High School. What they view – Australian teenage soaps, sacred Hindu soaps, British working class community soaps, advertisements targeted at global youth markets, Black American comedy shows; global, local and national news and current affairs; Bollywood and Hollywood films – is thus interpreted and appropriated in locally and culturally specific ways.

The juxtaposition of such a culturally diverse, transnational, multi-lingual array of television programmes and films in Southall provides British Asian youth with cultural and communicative resources which they use to compare and contrast, judge and evaluate their own and ‚other' social worlds of TV, to negotiate their identities and to debate a wide range of issues. Through soap opera they discuss kinship, courtship and marriage. What it means to have a ‚cool body' is negotiated through discussions of advertisements. The significance of the Gulf War 1991, British national and class politics, and a brutal, racist murder in Southall are debated with passion and reason through discussions of TV news about these events.

My central argument is that for 15-18 year olds living in a highly segregated ‚Asian' community or ‚ghetto', an important form of political participation, albeit indirect, limited and constrained, is enacted and institutionalised through the medium of ‚TV talk' (see GILLESPIE 1995, pp. 56-60). ‚Reading' news is perceived as a ‚rite of passage' among London Punjabi youth through which they begin to acquire adult status in the family (see GILLESPIE 1995, pp. 109-131). This is partly because young people, especially those with very well developed linguistic and cultural competences in English and Punjabi, Hindi or Urdu (all three languages are spoken in Punjab), serve as translators, cultural brokers or intermediaries for their families. Working in local factories and mixing mainly with other South Asians is not very conducive to learning English, and so many first generation migrants have limited competence in English. Younger members of the family often have to take a very active role on in dealing with state agencies – explaining life-threatening illness to doctors, paying the bills, gaining access to benefit entitlements, and completing tax forms – from a very early age. Southall families stress that TV news provides important knowledge of the wider society, crucial information about the rights and duties of citizenship, insights into the legal framework of society and into the political issues of the day.

News consumption in the, often extended or joint, British Asian family context is by no means an individual but rather a collective activity. It frequently involves young people translating English news into Punjabi or Hindi, as well as translating in the cultural sense of translating between and across cultures, and interpreting news narratives and information for their elders. It also involves the ability to discuss the news and public issues represented in a reasoned and adult manner. Thus, achieving adult-like status involves the

acquisition of communicative competences which young people use to assist their families mediate between the institutions of state and market, and the ability to function discursively within and across diasporic and transnational news and information networks. It is in this sense that, as I shall argue, everyday talk about news can be seen to constitute an initiation into the public sphere.

The first part of this article explains why young Southallians see television news as a marker of adulthood and as an initiation into adult and public discourse. Throughout, the article stresses the importance of adopting a processual approach to how young people gain entry to the world of adulthood and to the political arena which they see as complementary. Youth is understood as a process rather than as a set of prescribed stages which are determined by age. The aim of the article is to analyse the inter-relationship between the transition to adulthood, citizenship and the public sphere in a processual and holistic manner, and to understand the role of television in these processes. It highlights the way young people may actively acquire communicative competences and cultural resources through their news consumption which assist their entry into the public sphere.

The second part of this article examines HABERMAS' concept of the public sphere (HABERMAS 1989) and highlights the growing significance of diasporic public spheres among migrant cultures. It argues that a model of the public sphere which is explicitly organised to accommodate difference is required if genuine inclusion and participation among minority ethnics is to be achieved. The transnationalisation of the public sphere is intimately connected to globalisation but it is also a strategic response on the part of migrant cultures to their marginalisation, and often their exclusion, from arenas of national political debate.

2 Reading News as a Rite of Passage

Perhaps surprisingly, survey data indicates that TV news is the type of programme most frequently watched and most often discussed by young people and their parents living in Southall. However, interview and observational data consistently reveal that the majority of young people neither enjoy it very much (it's not entertainment) nor do they understand it very well (the vocabulary and syntax, the middle class language register, and the political context of news stories are often found to be difficult and challenging but vital to understanding the world as presented on TV). This paradoxical feature of their TV consumption can be explained partly by the fact that news viewing is a domestic ritual in most homes. Some news viewing is inescapable. There are however, more compelling reasons. Competence in understanding and talking about TV news is perceived as a marker of becoming adult and as a way of gaining access to the world beyond their own immediate or local experiences. It is seen as an initiation into the world of adult affairs and an induction into the various meanings of citizenship. Thus most young people in Southall are highly motivated to watch news because they wish to graduate to adult competence in the genre and acquire status in the family context and among peers.

2.1 Translations

In Southall, adult competence requires an ability to understand and discuss news from the Indian sub-continent in Punjabi, Hindi or Urdu. Yet young people are often more competent in understanding British news broadcasts than their parents. Translation of British news broadcasts, by young people for their parents and grandparents, is thus a characteristic feature of news viewing in many families. Translation activities confer status and some responsibility upon those who are able to act as interpreters, especially in explaining legal and civic rights and responsibilities. To be able to move with ease across cultural and linguistic barriers facilitates the transition from child to adult status. Knowledge of the world is normally passed from elders to children. In migrant cultures, the power relations involved in this process may be partially reversed when young people's linguistic competence enables them to acquire fuller knowledge of the surrounding culture and society than their elders.

In this context, becoming adult is not only linked with competence in the translation and interpretation of news stories but also involves the ability to locate oneself within various social categories (gender, generation, ‚race', ethnicity, etc.) and multiple frames of reference: national and international, local and global. This favours the development of the kind of ‚cosmopolitan' consciousness discussed by HANNERZ (1990).

National news tends to address its viewers as citizens, especially but not only at times of national crisis or war. However, London Punjabi families find that their status as national citizens is often challenged by racist and discriminatory practices and attitudes: their sense of ‚belonging' to Britain is frequently problematised, while their political and cultural affinities are inextricably bound up with their colonial past and post-colonial present. Young people display deeply ambivalent attitudes to the idea of national identity – whether framed as ‚being' ‚British' or ‚Indian' or ‚Pakistani'. Self-conscious ambivalence towards received notions of national, ethnic and religious identity is linked with increasing awareness of the interconnectedness of local and global affairs, and with the development of a pluralist ethos; and these in turn are perceived by many as a sign of becoming adult.

2.2 ‚Chust' and ‚siani'

Initiation into adult circles of communication is facilitated by acquiring *chust* status. According to my informants, this Punjabi word has a number of connotations. It means being able to gain respect in adult company by being ‚quick, showing wit and getting your point of view across'; ‚being able to talk well and fit in with everybody'; ‚being able to talk well in Punjabi and in English'; ‚knowing when to be serious and when to joke'; ‚knowing how to talk to elders'; ‚being informed and able to express what you know in an adult way'; and ‚being able to answer adult questions safely without causing an argument'. In other words the term encapsulates a set of skills, personal qualities and values associated with becoming adult: intelligence and sociability, tact and discretion, respect and deference. Thus to be *chust* is to acquire status through an internalisation of culturally specific codes of communication with elders – although in the Southall context, the competences involved also become those associated with ‚cosmopolitanism' in HANNERZ's sense, since they include skills in translation, in the literal sense as well as in an extended

cultural sense. Bilingualism is important since it enables young people to act as cultural brokers, interpreters, mediators and even arbiters in family disputes and decision-making:

Pervinder: By watching the news, your parents know that you've gone through a stage, that you can talk in an adult way, you watch them talking about the news in an adult way and then you begin to fit in you don't seem like a child any more [...] they treat you as a chust kid, you know, grown up.

The counterpart of *chust* is *siani* which, according to informants, means ‚wise and sensible', ‚quiet and reserved', ‚modest'. If one is *siani* one gains acceptance in adult circles. Some claim that *chust* and *siani* are gendered concepts. Girls claim they are encouraged to be *siani*, in the sense of ‚restrained' in verbal interaction. However, one's position in the family hierarchy may also affect one's *chust* or *siani* status. Thus the desire to graduate to adult competence in news is not gender specific. Rather, it is dependent upon one's intellectual and communicative competence. But it also requires an interest and competence in news about the Indian sub-continent.

2.3 Diasporic connections and consciousness

The priority and sense of urgency given to news about India in the parental culture is reliterated by many informants. It is seen to be a link to their ‚country's roots'; feelings of attachment to India and nostalgia remain strong despite settlement in Britain. Political turmoil in the Punjab in the last decade has been an added incentive. Many families have relatives there and fears about their safety are often intense.

The anxiety among Sikhs in Southall about obtaining reliable news from the Punjab in the 1980s was partly due to perceived distortions, inaccuracies and omissions in the coverage by Doordarshan and AIR, the main Indian news channels, which in many people's eyes exacerbated Hindu communalism and portrayed Sikhs generally as ‚terrorists' (see SINGH 1985). The Punjabi diaspora press widely reported such distortions, encouraging close scrutiny in Southall of different accounts in various Hindi, Punjabi and English-language media. The BBC was often seen as uncritically accepting the line of the ruling Indian Congress Party; but at other times, especially when reporting restrictions were imposed, it was seen as offering the only source of impartial accounts of events.

A young person's interest in news from the Indian sub-continent is shaped by several factors. Interest is likely to be higher where there is direct experience of the country; competence in Punjabi; a degree of religious and cultural knowledge; parental encouragement; and close affective links with kin locally and in the Punjab. The idea that India is the family homeland and the fear that some day one may be deported were also given as reasons for maintaining links with India via news. The type of news story, its topicality and currency in local communication networks may be just as important in generating an interest. A growing awareness of the interplay of Indian sub-continental and local politics through the medium of the international diaspora is an integral part of the diasporic experience, which young people respond to in very different ways.

Learning the skills of translating and debating news also involves learning about, and in some cases re-defining Southall's local news and political culture (see my account of responses to a local racist murder in GILLESPIE 1995, pp. 115-118). As an ‚ethnic ghetto' news representations of Southall invariably focus on racism, riots, or the impact of sensational events in the Indian sub-continent (such as the murder of Indira GANDHI or the

storming of the Golden Temple in Amritsar) on local life – as such Southall is part of a trans-local world and transnational or diasporic community. Participation in Southall's political culture involves public debates about the representation and interpretation of local events, historically and currently. Young people construct their own version of that news history according to their own experiences. Unlike many of their elders, for example, they see religious sectarianism as a bigger local threat than racism. They argue that Southall was turned into an ‚Asian community' or ghetto both as a result of, and in response to racism. Most young Southallians do not experience racism locally but they do encounter religious sectarianism. Thus, there are generational differences in local perceptions of Southall's news and political culture, youth very often challenging the accounts of their elders, particularly when issues of ‚racial' and religious conflict are discussed. They have a different political agenda. They use reasoned argument to express their own political culture and their desire to transcend religious conflicts.

However, for Southall youth it would appear that conventional British party politics are of less interest than the cultural politics of identity which seem to have taken centre-stage. ‚Asian' youth express their politics in hybrid cultural forms such as bhangra music – and, in doing so embrace a pan-Asian identity which transcends some of the religious divides inherent in the parental culture. Arguably though, this is a form of disenfranchisement. However, rather than bearing a specific allegiance to any one party or faction, young people take up political positions provisionally, in relation to particular issues, in particular contexts, and ambivalently. Many of their political interests lie in the transnational sphere and concern the politics of gender, ‚race' and the environment, as well as human and cultural rights. A wide range of potential identifications are open to them (or thrust upon them), each of which is subject to dislocation by others, and only some of which can comfortably co-exist or be combined in stable hybrid forms. It was in talk about the Gulf War that the complexities involved in these intersubjective processes of identification surfaced most clearly (to be discussed later).

2.4 The pluralisation of the public sphere

The term ‚public sphere' is used in a variety of competing historically contingent senses. It is used here in its most general, Habermasian sense to refer to all the places and forums where people gather to discuss the issues of the day, particularly political topics, where information, ideas and debate essential to citizenship and participation in the democratic process can circulate, and where political opinion can be formed.

Though now over three decades old, and the subject of many critiques (CALHOUN 1993) HABERMAS' notion of the public sphere continues to inspire thinking about the relationship of media to democracy, as well as many progressive interventions in media policies.

It is a useful concept, especially in helping to maintain an analytical distinction between the apparatus of the state and of the market, on the one hand, and public arenas of debate among citizens, on the other (see FRASER 1993). And yet it always remains a partial achievement and a contested space, constituted by difference and conflict, shaped by social structural factors, public institutions, media and education, as well as by the discursive interactions of everyday life in civil society.

While the media are not the only instruments of the public sphere, they are pre-eminent. Television is the major institution of the public sphere in modern society. It plays a

central role in the working of democracies, and is an integral part of the political structure and process (see MURDOCK 1991; DAHLGREN 1995).

In contemporary plural and increasingly globalised societies the public sphere cannot be conceived in exclusively national or culturally homogenous terms. Nor is it a sphere dedicated solely to adult, highly educated, bourgeois elites. My research supports other evidence underscoring the emergence of diasporic public spheres among migrant cultures which transcend national political arenas and which depend on media for self-representation and advocacy. Examples include separatist movements among Sikhs and Sri Lankan Tamils, Islamic youth movements, global Hindu missions, as well as movements concerned with Human Rights, refugees, exiles and other displaced persons, racism, women's or environmental issues. These are no longer small, marginal and exceptional but part of the cultural dynamic of urban life in countries where migration and media contribute to the formation of both transnational ethnicities and social movements. Thus, new kinds of debates take place between those who stay and those who move across national boundaries (see CLIFFORD 1994; APPADURAI 1996).

My data suggest that working-class, racialised youth living in mixed ethnic milieus often possess and express acute forms of political and culture consciousness, articulated through the lens of their colonial past and post-colonial present (see also BAUMANN 1996). Indeed, the development of a cosmopolitan attitude and diasporic consciousness is a strategic response on the part of minority youth to the inequities and constraints of their experiences in and of the nation state. Forms of ‚double consciousness' (DU BOIS 1986) assist them in their deconstructions of daily news events – be they local or global, national or international. In some cases, especially with those who are defined as *chust* or ‚smart', minority youth enter the informal arenas of political debate in their early teens, as we have seen.

Clearly, members of TV news audiences and of the public sphere itself are not equivalent, nor are they equals in communicative intention, participation or power. Nevertheless, daily news consumption, and the debates it generates in the interstices of the private and public, form the initiation ground into political discourse for young people, especially given the regrettable lack of any formal or enabling political education in British schools. Furthermore, social and cultural processes surrounding the collective interpretation of news may transform an audience into a form of public sphere.

An extensive pluralisation of the public sphere is taking place. Cross-cutting cleavages of class, ‚race' and ethnicity, gender and generation, region and religion generate cultural and ideological contest and negotiation among a variety of public spheres. This raises sharply the recurrent problem of the boundaries and dimensions of the public sphere. Who is included and excluded? How do the parts relate to the whole? What new forms or dimensions exist? Indeed, is there an emergent global public sphere? And what are the implications of such developments for democracy? These are by no means new debates but they are ever more acutely posed as a result of contemporary migration and media. GARNHAM, for example, argues that:

> There must be a single public sphere, even if we might want to conceive of this single public sphere as made up of a series of subsidiary public spheres, each organised around its own political structure, media system and set of norms and interests. [...] If market forces are global in scope, any effective political response has to be global. (GARNHAM 1993, pp. 371-372)

If a global public sphere does emerge it will be wired into the structure of the media themselves but will it be organised around exclusions at traditional boundaries of age and ethnicity, class and gender, rather than inclusions?

2.5 A processual perspective on the public sphere

These questions cannot be fully answered here, but I want to make some progress in that direction by documenting ethnographically some dimensions of, and constraints upon, the communicative interactions taking place in the emergent public sphere of the peer culture studied. But first of all, I want to argue for the importance of adopting a processual perspective on the interrelationship between the transition to adulthood, citizenship and the public sphere – one which allows for an often lengthy and slow induction into both adult and political discourse. This is of relevance to educators and researchers alike. My data confirm that the ability to talk about affairs of political and public interest and concern is a significant marker of becoming ‚adult'. Among minority youth in Southall, and perhaps elsewhere, it is perceived to constitute an entry into understanding and operating in the wider society, to citizenship, and (though not expressed as such) into the public sphere. This is not surprising when one considers their marginalisation in British society and ghettoisation in an ‚ethnic community' with all the attendant problems that this concept holds. Listening respectfully to the voices of young people demonstrates how they develop their discursive competences in close connection with the social facts of everyday life and cultivate fine judgements about the contextual efficacy of mobilising different discourses, especially about culture, ethnicity and community (see BAUMANN 1996).

From a processual and developmental perspective, acquiring adult-like status in the family and peer culture is only loosely connected with age. It is more closely related to life-course events, social relationships and the negotiations which take place between young people, their families, peers and the institutions of the wider society. Different groups of young people become accepted as adult in different ways in different contexts. Among London Punjabi youth, becoming adult requires the deployment of a set of communicative and civic competences which can be applied to the pragmatics of everyday household, financial and business administration; and to dealings with the state institutions such as offices of social services, health, welfare, education, law and tax which require a fairly high level of literacy that might challenge first generation migrants and thus may be undertaken by their children. But adult status also requires extending a conception of self beyond that which is set by the framework of the family and kinship and schooling into the public and adult domain of the duties and obligations, rights and responsibilities associated with citizenship.

The information, orientation, communicative competences and conception of self required for modern civic life and civil society, gleaned and imparted through the prism of news and news talk, explains why ‚reading' news is understood as a ‚rite of passage'. For the moment, I will outline some features of the discursive space of the peer culture in relation to three of HABERMAS' criteria for the effective functioning of his (idealised) notion of the public sphere. These are: independence from state and market; rational debate based on face-to-face interaction; and inclusiveness.

2.5.1 Independence from state and market

To young people, initiation into political and adult discourse takes place at the overlapping boundaries of the private and the public. Television has powerfully altered public/private boundaries in recent decades, effecting an interpenetration of both spheres. Moreover, the peer culture functions with ‚relative autonomy' from both the public world of state education and the private world of the family. In terms of the spatio-cultural location of debate, the sphere of communicative action activated by the peer culture parallels the cafes, church halls and other public spaces of interaction outside direct state and market control in HABERMAS' ideal. Young people begin to learn the some of the skills associated with active citizenship and participation in the public sphere in the peer culture where they are free from direct surveillance or control of teachers and parents.

2.5.2 Rational debate

HABERMAS' ideal concept of public sphere insists on the centrality of rational, critical discourse. The process of reasoning involves presenting arguments and validity claims which underwrite actions and beliefs. Meaning is achieved, not given, through communication.

There certainly is rational debate in the ‚readings' of news events and vehement discussion of political options in young people's TV talk. During my fieldwork news consumption stimulated debate about a wide range of political issues framed by an overarching discourse of rights – human, democratic, equal, political and cultural. 1988-91 was, of course, a time of momentous change: the collapse of the USSR, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the release of Nelson MANDELA, the fatwa on Salman RUSHDIE, the massacre at Tiananmen Square and the Gulf War of 1991. These were all debated with reason and emotion, as were more local and national issues such as alternatives to Margaret THATCHER's government and the Poll Tax, to war and oppression, to religious sectarianism and to racism and sexism. Private issues, such as gender in the family, or personal experiences of racism, were indeed articulated as public concerns which were then mobilised to develop a rational position and express ideas about how best to run things.

Yet everyday political discourse is not entirely guided by some abstract logic of rationality: affective, aesthetic and moral dimensions of judgement and evaluation come into play as well. And when one considers the full range of issues being debated, particularly questions of identity, it becomes obvious that the cultural resources which television provides are derived from the Culture Industry and, from the perspective of a political economy of communication, are undeniably severely restricted and dominated by a market-derived rationality. GARNHAM points out that „consumer taste publics use, as badges of identity, symbols created and circulated in the sphere of advertising" (GARNHAM 1993, p. 372). While accepting the ‚relative autonomy' of active, reasoning agents and the possibilities of creative cultural bricolage, we must recognise that the symbolic sphere is hierarchically structured. The discursive world created by the better educated, high-achieving young people is effectively closed to many of their less able, low-achieving peers who lack the educational and cultural competences required to achieve a sophisticated level of rational debate.

HABERMAS' notion of the public sphere is wedded to face-to-face interaction, based upon classical Greek notions of the functioning of democracy. He distrusts mediated representation as an obstacle to discursive rationality and communicative authenticity.

While one cannot deny the ideological thrust of mediated communication, the notion of ‚authentic' communication is suspect. Surely all communication is mediated via language? Furthermore, what is often overlooked in analyses of distinctions between mediated electronic and face-to-face communication is that they are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the central focus of my ethnography is the dynamic interaction between mass mediated and interpersonal communication: the latter is neither wholly determined, nor entirely creative and free from the ideological underpinnings of either state or market.

The crucial role played by face-to-face talk, by the socio-cultural interactions around television, is also stressed by DAHLGREN (1995). He argues that the relationship between television and the public sphere should not be analysed exclusively in terms of media institutions and representations, as is conventional, but also in terms of the hugely important role of socio-cultural interaction generated by television among citizens. This not only involves people acting out their roles as citizens and discussing social and political issues but also:

> the more fundamental construction of social reality at the intersubjective level. Society is, in part, generated and maintained and altered in our ongoing interactions, in a complex interplay with structural and historical factors. Norms, collective frames of reference, even our identities, ultimately derive from socio-cultural interaction. In short, it is via such interaction, and the practices that it embodies, that we generate our culture. This dimension of interaction constitutes an irreducible component of the public sphere. Not all interaction is a manifestation of the public sphere, but the point is that the functioning of the public sphere is greatly dependent upon the nature of socio-cultural interaction. (DAHLGREN 1995, pp. x-xi)

The discursive interactions around television are clearly limited and constrained. They are at best a necessary but not sufficient condition for political change to occur. In this sense the public sphere, as DAHLGREN points out, is also a place of social disciplining and social exclusion.

2.5.3 Inclusion/exclusion

The emerging bourgeois public sphere which HABERMAS describes established itself as inclusive in principle. Anyone with access to cultural artefacts had at least a potential claim to participate in public debate:

> However exclusive the public might be in any given instance, it could never close itself off entirely and become consolidated as a clique; for it always understood and immersed itself within a more inclusive public of all private people, persons who – insofar as they were propertied and educated – as readers, listeners and spectators could avail themselves via the market of objects that were subject to discussion. (HABERMAS 1989, p. 37)

If inclusiveness is an essential feature of the public sphere, then it follows that any subsidiary sphere, in principle, cannot be dedicated to an ethnic group which is by definition exclusive. I have already alluded to the ways in which much TV talk among London Punjabi youth involves the negotiation of identities and is about a constant re-defining of ‚us' as opposed to ‚them' in different contexts, for different purposes. But what are the implications of an insistence on cultural difference or exclusiveness, even if formulated in terms of a South Asian or a Black diasporic public sphere? Clearly, ethno-political mobilisation serves in the competition for scarce material resources. It is also true that many

minority youth are seeking inclusion into nationally defined social and political arenas from an excluded position. How are we to understand and apply this criterion of inclusiveness in multi-ethnic, plural societies, which are marked by persistent gross inequalities, racism and discrimination?

At least rhetorics of inclusiveness are frequently deployed, and the management of diversity is increasingly recognised as a political (and educational) task. But the growing significance of transnational, alternative and diasporic public spheres calls for new approaches to understanding communicative and cultural practices and their links with political processes. In GARNHAM's words:

> [..] the entertainment content of the media is clearly the primary tool we use to handle the relationship between the systems world and the lifeworld. It is on the basis of understandings drawn from those communicative experiences and of identities formed around them that we arrive at more overtly rational and political opinions and actions – the dynamics of this process [...] are a much neglected area. (GARNHAM 1993, p. 374).

I shall now examine the extent to which such criteria are fulfilled in young Southallians reception of Gulf War news.

3 The Gulf War news reception 1991

Most young people refused the very terms in which the war was justified by the British state and represented by media. They neither backed British state policy and the Allied invasion, nor Saddam HUSSEIN. Rather, they mobilised a Human Rights discourse which sided unequivocally with the innocent victims of war, especially children and women.

Though many were initially captivated by CNN's dramatic footage of this video-game war, few took an uncritical view of that channel's market-led journalism. Most young people stressed distortions and biases, offering extensive examples. This was assisted by their exposure to multiple, culturally diverse and alternative news sources.

Especially among the more academically oriented young people, communicative interactions in the peer culture remained relatively resistant to state and market mediated propaganda. However, access to alternative news sources significantly assisted those less academically orientated to engage in active and reasoned debate.

Alternative and multiple sources of news, information and debate within the local political culture assisted the process of reasoning for most young people in Southall, as did a deep political and affective engagement with a discourse of Human Rights. Many saw their recruitment to the ‚video-game' war as an attempt to sanitise slaughter, to protect them from any relation to the victims, and to heighten a feeling of security. At the same time, most young people recognised that media representations of the war created a paranoiac environment, rich in danger and threat – evoked and manipulated fears, and increased a sense of vulnerability. This culminated in a profound critique of the war and a cynicism about the motivations of both the Allied and Iraqi forces.

As young people they criticised adults for making war. As young women they attacked men for causing wars. There was a widespread outrage at racist remarks by British politicians and of the way some media reports categorically lumped together people of different religions and national origins just because of the colour of their skin, expressing

suspicion that ‚they' might be supporters of Saddam Hussein and therefore ‚enemies within'. Thus profoundly emotional and also ethical dimensions fed into, and were an inseparable part of their rational debate.

For Southall youth and their families, TV coverage of the Gulf War highlighted the contradiction of being addressed by the news media as part of the British nation, while at the same time, the national status and loyalty to Britain of ‚Asian immigrants' was being more insistently questioned than is usually the case in public discourse. The outbreak of the war thus precipitated an intensification of debate among young people in Southall about religious and ethnic, national and political allegiances.

Many young Muslims in Southall were deeply worried about the effects of the war on their religion and its possible consequences for themselves, asserting a transnational allegiance with the Muslim *Umma*.

Differences between parental and peer viewpoints were also most intense for young Muslims, who often expressed the need to find a delicate balance between the two, though rarely so poignantly as did *Kashif*:

> For me the war is a conflicting factor. I come to school and the Gulf War is somewhere and then I go home and it's different. My mother she sees the war on TV and she tells me I should even go and fight if need be. [...] At home I have to keep the family order so I can't exactly have opposing views to my parents, like showing them opposing views and when I go to a highly English area, I have to keep social order, you know, whatever the public view is, you might have your own views but you can't express them [...].

Kashif is both ‚westernised' and Muslim in varying degrees in different situations. He uses a strategic form of rationality, shifting his position according to context in order, as he says, to keep both the family order, based upon Islam, and the social order, based upon ‚western' views. Trying to cope with the variety of roles he has to play and the expectations demanded of him is assisted by the distinction he makes between his public and private selves. In front of his father he will confirm his role as a ‚pure Muslim' in order to avoid conflict and resentment. Similarly, at school he finds that he takes the Allies' side: „Like here when I say ‚we' I mean the Allies but at home I say ‚them'". This shifting of positions according to different contexts is commonplace; indeed, the ability to deal with contradiction, ambivalence and ambiguity pragmatically, while as far as possible remaining true to oneself inwardly, is seen to be a sign of maturity. In Southall, this type of skill is another facet of the adulthood associated with understanding news. Kashif accepted that his strategy was necessary to ‚keep the peace' and ‚social order'.

The insecurity that the Gulf War provoked is revealing of deeper ambiguities concerning definitions of self in relation to significant others. The war coverage heightened young people's awareness of how they are perceived by ‚others', members of the British public in particular; and this in turn generated debate about the vulnerability of their position in Britain, and about the difficulties of ‚fitting in' both ‚here' and ‚there' – in India and in Britain, at school and at home.

The Gulf War and other international, national and local news events, mediated by multiple, culturally diverse information channels, impinge in various ways on life in Southall. The debates precipitated by such news events – or rather, by such plural news coverages and the diverse interpretations of them – prompt teenagers to become acutely conscious of the diversity of positions they are obliged, invited or able to choose to take up, in varying contexts, as members of internally diverse diaspora ‚communities' and as

British citizens. They find themselves constantly needing to ask ‚Who am I', ‚Where do I speak from?' and ‚Who is speaking on my behalf?' as well as ‚Who is speaking to me?', and they answer these questions differently, and often ambivalently, in different circumstances. The skills involved in negotiating these questions of identity from context to context are learned in the process of graduation from child to adult status in the eyes of families and peers; and this process is accelerated when, in response to dramatic public events, young people are (or feel) called upon take up explicit positions – as if to resolve ambiguities and ambivalences, which, however, remain. Of all events, war most powerfully insists on a thinking in terms of stark binary oppositions – us and them, friend and foe. Such terms reveal themselves as woefully inadequate to the complexities of these young people's sense of hybrid national and cultural identity and to their cosmopolitanism.

4 Towards a global public sphere?

This article has documented ethnographically the role of TV news talk in a peer culture in the intertwined transitions to adulthood and to citizenship, and in sowing the seeds of a generationally and ethnically distinctive political culture and nascent public sphere. But the question of who is talking to whom with what kind of political efficacy remains salient. Whether we can look forward with optimism to the coming of age of this nascent public sphere, and to the full participation and inclusion in the democratic process of its members, also remains to be seen. But there are some signs of hope as well as causes for concern. If anything, contradiction and ambivalence seen to lie at the heart of contemporary cultural developments and what the future holds is uncertain.

The ethnographic insights have been discussed in relation to HABERMAS' analytical and normative concept of the public sphere and analysed in the context of globalisation. As cultural differentiation and fragmentation proceed alongside cultural globalisation, we are witnessing the rather uneven emergence of a global public sphere. New forms of cultural and consumer citizenship and associated cultural and consumer rights are in the process of being debated, formulated and promulgated. But there is also evidence that cultural and identity politics are supplanting more conventional forms of political activity and that issue-based transnational social movements around environmental, gender and ‚race' issues are central to young people's political consciousness.

My data suggests that cultural globalisation involves not only the technologies of communication, the growth of a common consumer and information culture – Cocacolonisation, MacCulture and CNN – but also the emergence of a global political culture. There is evidence that certain cultural norms, expectations and values are being globalised. Alongside rampant consumerism, there is growing recognition of human mutual interdependence and interrelationship, accompanied by an attachment to discourses of entitlement to different forms of citizenship and rights, including equal political and cultural rights. Many of these discourses originated in western liberal democracies but they are increasingly, despite huge differences in their meaning in different social contexts, part of the way of life and political discourse of people across the world.

But if we can talk of the emergence of a global public sphere (signified by moments of crisis or liberation such as the Gulf War of 1991, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the release of Nelson MANDELA, and by totemic global events like ‚Live Aid' and, in the UK, the now

annual charity fund-raising marathon ‚Comic Relief') then it is characterised most strikingly by emotional affect which conditions and shapes the cognitive or rational effect (see MCGUIGAN 1997). This suggests that HABERMAS' ideal was somewhat over-cognitive and over-rational and that he underplayed the significance of the affectivity of popular media culture in creating [transnational] solidarities, new forms of ‚imagined community' and collective identities. This is especially evident in the emergence of diasporic public spheres among migrant cultures – the impact of which remains to be investigated and understood.

However, as SPARKS (1997) has pointed out, if a global public sphere does fully emerge, it is likely to be structured around exclusions (around age and ethnicity, class and gender) rather than inclusions, unless it is explicitly organised to accommodate difference. And, unlike in the early bourgeois epoch, the exclusions of the future global public sphere will be wired into the very structure of the media.

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